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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study was conducted at an alternative school for middle school and high school students who had been caught with a weapon in school. At the start of the study, the school's enrollment was 60 students. Data comes from participant observations, action research conducted in a service project, and interviews with staff and students. The school had a well-defined population but did not have a comprehensive approach to anger management, prosocial behavior, and violence prevention strategies. Life at this school was challenging for students and staff. Staff tried to do the best they could with the limited resources they had. They were frustrated by lack of time, supplies, and support. Teachers struggled to teach in a culture in which violence was part of daily survival. Students tried to stay safe and to have romantic relationships and friendships. The study demonstrates the need for and importance of ethnographic research in understanding violence in the schools. (SLD)

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Beyond the Numbers:

Ethnography of Life at an Alternative School for Students Caught with Weapons

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Beyond the Numbers:

Ethnography of Life at an Alternative School for Students Caught with Weapons

There have been only a few studies of the effectiveness of alternative educational programs for violent, disruptive, and delinquent youth, and no systematic qualitative analysis of a particular alternative school for these students. Loeber and Farrington (1998, p. 391) identified the need for qualitative research "to better understand causes of serious and violent juvenile offending." To date, no analyses have examined the culture of an alternative school for such students from the perspective of those who experience it daily. This project was an ethnographic study at an alternative school for middle school and high school aged students who had been caught with a weapon in their regular school. This study includes participant observations, action research of a service learning project, and interviews with staff and students.

Perspectives, theoretical framework, method, and data sources

The statistics at the *weapons school* showed that there were few punished episodes of violent behavior (suspensions, expulsions, etc.). The numbers do not tell the whole story. This research project tells the story from the perspective of the students and staff in the school, using their words, their experiences, and their frustrations of working in a school with few of the essential supplies, part-time teachers, constant student and teacher turnover, and little district support or direction. This project begins from the perspective of the researcher who conducted participant observations of classes, guest speakers, intake, hallways, and cafeteria behavior for the academic year 1997-1998. In addition, the researcher conducted an action research project with students from the school who were involved in a literacy community service project working with

elementary school children for 4 months. Fieldnotes were taken, interviews were transcribed, and using the constant-comparative method, coding categories were examined and themes emerged.

A Review of the Literature

A comprehensive review of the literature by Carol Kochar (1998) entitled "Alternative Schools for Chronically Disruptive, Violent, and Delinquent Youth" found that most programs were housed separately from "regular schools" (60%) and sixteen percent were in-school programs. She concluded that generally students in alternative programs are less violent, but upon their return to their regular schools, the reductions in violent behavior tend not to continue. She offered a disclaimer that "general conclusions could only be moderately substantiated in this review, and need to be answered with greater confidence through a more in depth study of selected programs." (p. 2). The weapons school was housed separately from the other schools in the city school district, and students at the school were not allowed on any other school grounds during their year at the school. Although the numbers of suspensions might indicate that there are fewer fights and other violent episodes at the school, this ethnography revealed that violent behavior was prevalent and pervasive—underlying most all interactions at the school. Because this behavior becomes normalized, there are many behaviors such as bullying, hitting, slapping, and other chronically disruptive behavior that go unpunished. The administrator of the weapons school describes this escalating violence:

> We've always had the crowds that come to a fight but the crowd would come and gawk and cheer on but if you went up to them and said, all right break it up, go to class, they would go. But what's happening now is they're not going. And they're turning around, go 'get your mother fucking hands off me,' and they're hitting staff. So it's escalated to that level. So that whole issue, the safety issue of breaking these kids up... and it's not one and two, there's a cast of characters now—like five or six.

Kochar (1998, p. 2) summarized the "key aspects of programs that seem[ed] to be most effective in reducing violence." These were as follows:

> small class size with low student-to-teacher ratio; comprehensive approaches with a well-defined population; voluntary rather than mandatory enrollment; use of peer groups to model prosocial behavior; well defined standards and rules with effective monitoring; clear and consistent goals shared by all stakeholders (staff, parents, students, community); caring, competent, and dedicated staff; strong school leadership; democratic climate that involves students, staff, and families in decision making; individually tailored instruction, with self-paced learning, that responds to cultural differences and learning styles; high standards and expectations for performance; parental community involvement; program accountability and program evaluation; effective financial support; effective cooperation among agencies involved with the student; vocational education, job preparation and job placement.

She argued further that despite all the evidence about the importance of helping students with the transition back to their regular schools, alternative schools have typically not focused efforts on facilitating the transition.

The weapons program had many of these components of "successful" programs, but was missing several key aspects. First, the school was mandatory for students caught with anything that could be construed as a weapon in school. Second, there was no use of peer groups to model behavior. Parents were typically not involved in decision making, although they were involved in during the intake process (i.e., it was necessary that a parent or guardian accompany his or her child to school on the first day). Third, although some students and teachers tried to have high expectations for performance, most did not. Most of the staff was frustrated because they could not find strategies that worked with most students. Despite the fact that this program was initially designed to be self-paced and offer individual instruction, as the school grew larger (with no more resources), teachers felt they had to abandon their individualized strategies for more group instruction. This was difficult because students were coming in at different times during the

academic year and had varied levels of preparedness. Teachers attempted to "teach" in a traditional lecture-style way, and students tended to rebel more often in these classes. This chapter will go through these different "key aspects" and discuss how each of these were conceptualized in theory and how they were actually put into practice.

Student-teacher ratio

When I first started my observations in the Fall of 1997, there were only 60 students enrolled in the school, and only about sixty percent who attended regularly. The eighth and ninth grade classes were the largest. These students also tended to attend more regularly because most were on probation and were under 16, so if not in school, they were in violation of their probation and would end up in the juvenile detention facility. Many of the students at weapons had been to the facility at some point.

Teachers and counselors who had been at the school from the time of its inception informed me that the school originally had been in one large room with three teachers (Math, Science, and English), with a counselor and a principal. The focus of instruction was individualized. Teachers developed packets of materials for students because they had no books.

Raji, who taught Health, Spanish, all of the Sciences (Biology, Chemistry, General Science) and any other course they asked her to teach explained how the shift happened:

> From 8 or 9 we went to 35 suddenly. So there they are at 9:00 in the morning. No books, nothing. There they are. What do you do with them? So we had...we borrowed a T.V./VCR from upstairs from the Division for Youth (DES). We showed them a movie but how many movies can you show. They were there and gradually we got them books and got... it was a totally individualized program. I mean each student because we were still home bound so they considered us as home bound. It was an individualized and having 30-35 kids it was so difficult to keep it individualized. We tried and we did keep it like that for a while... So Mr. Fields was the person in charge of that program so he came over one day and I was frustrated. I said why do we have to keep these kids all day. That's when the split day got started [high school students are in school from 9:00-12:00 and the

> middle schoolers are there from 11:00-2:00]. They said no you don't have to. If they don't have work to do they go home. I said why didn't anybody tell us that.

By the end of the year of my project, there were nearly 100 students on the roster, and in the middle of March, the central school administration added a sixth grade with only one more additional part-time teacher. This was "typical" according to the veteran teachers and administrators. They were frustrated because it seemed to them that the administration kept adding more students without giving them any more supplies, teachers, or space. The weapons school was viewed as a limitless warehouse for students with staff who could handle any number of these students. The staff felt as though their complaints fell on deaf ears, so they stopped complaining to the district administrators and tried to make do the best they could.

Non-comprehensive approach with a well-defined population

The population was clearly articulated at the weapons school. Put simply, they were students who had been caught with a weapon in school. Where the lines became blurred was with what constituted a weapon. For some it was a paring knife, for some a box cutter, and for some mace or pepper spray. There were stories of the occasional water gun and pen knife that were in someone's back pack or locker and found during a random search and the student was sent to the weapons school because there was a zero-tolerance policy, but these were rare.

Despite having a well-defined population, however, there was not a comprehensive approach. Discussions about anger management, prosocial behavior, and strategies to prevent violence were few and far between. I observed the programs that were designed to teach these skills. These were two-hour workshops conducted in the first month of school. Because students came in and left throughout the year (depending on when they were caught), many students missed these workshops.

Students talked a great deal about weapons and how they ended up at the weapons school. Because this was what they all had in common, this was typically fodder for initial meetings and conversations. In these stories among students, the weapon was always much more dangerous than what they described to adults when they arrived. This way of "frontin'" as the students called it (putting on an act that you were tougher than you actually were) was common. However, discussions with adults about weapon-carrying and strategies for controlling anger and avoiding violence were rare. If these conversations did happen they usually ignored the fact that what drove many acts of violence were issues of loyalty (to friends and romantic interests) and passion. Emotions were almost always left out of these discussions as students were given rational reasons to walk away from violence and told the consequences for their behavior. However, when reacting quickly out of anger, jealousy, passion, or protection; people often do not take the time to consider the consequences of their behavior. I watched many "teachable moments" where students glorified weapon carrying and drug use that went ignored. Most of the less-experienced teachers did not seem to have the skills to deal with these issues. And most everyone agreed that the classroom was not a place for behavior that involved strong emotion or issues that were "too personal."

I did observe one workshop of the "Respect" program that did talk briefly about some of these issues. The trainer was one of the best in the area for discussing these issues, and even she did not know what to say when these students argued that weapons were good and fighting was absolutely necessary. This exchange was fairly typical when adults in the school tried to argue that violence was not the solution and that weapon carrying was only going to lead to problems:

> Angie asked, "what do you use when you fight?"
> Students shouted out as she wrote on the newsprint: "teeth, fists, scratch, pull hair, use mace, boxcutters, knives, kick, hit."

Angie went over the list of these and asked whether each was positive or negative. Students said these were all positive, and some began to talk about how they got sent to the weapons school because they were caught with these things.

The males were noticeably silent during much of this.

Angie said her belief that these weapons were not good.

One girl asked Angie "have you ever been in a fight?"

Angie said, "yes."

Another girl said, "she don't know--wake up and smell the coffee, hellllllllloooo...you don't know--this is the nineties...you ain't hearin' us--you tellin' us to just let us thump you?"

Angie told her story of growing up in an all White farm area in upstate New York where she had crosses burned on her yard, and in school other students were afraid of her because she was the only Black student. Others assumed she carried weapons, but she didn't. She knew there were rumors circulating that she carried a knife.

One girl shouted out, "you gonna die if you don't got no weapon."

Angie said, "you risk dying every time you fight--better be prepared to die for whatever you're fighting for." She explained how fights can escalate and people can get killed from even the most harmless seeming fight.

Someone said that the "police don't care and you're gonna go to jail if you're caught."

Angie explained, "violence is a choice...better be prepared for the consequences...my cousin's responsibility for shooting someone, and he's in jail...what I hear you all saying is that you like the way you live...that you wouldn't change it."

Some said, "yeah"

Angie said, "what I'm sayin' is that there's a better way, and I believe that, this is why I do these trainings--because I care and I don't want any more killing and hurting."

One of the boys, who sat silently through much of the discussion and did not want to participate in the activities said, "why bother to care, if people want to kill themselves--let 'em."

Angie said, "but I want people to begin to think about doing something different."

With that she said, "let's go upstairs and watch the video" when asked what it was about she said that it was about guns and teens.

Frustration in these situations is obvious—on both the students' and the adults' parts. Adults want to talk about making rational decisions that consider the consequences of behavior. Some people, including many young people react emotionally out of passion without considering consequences. Students think that adults do not understand and adults can not understand why young people will not listen to them. This is an age-old struggle of adolescence, but the issue here is that both parties want to stay alive. Young people have weapons to protect themselves so they

can stay alive, and adults tell them not to carry weapons or they will end up getting killed or imprisoned. So when our words do not cut it, we send them to watch their favorite form of media—the video. The students did sit still and listen to the video, which told personal stories of tragedy due to gun violence. Students did not comment about the video, but I did notice the expression of sadness of one of the young men, who silently sat during the video. I found out later that he had spent the previous night with his neighbor friend who had been shot in the leg.

Young people in this environment seemed to need a place where they could share their feelings with another person. The teachers did not see the classroom as an appropriate place, so when these emotions erupted as "discipline problems," teachers sent the students out, or told them to be quiet. "Good students" were the ones who kept their pain and passion to themselves.

There were people some students would go to in the school when they were troubled. The popular places were the guidance counselor, the school nurse (although she was only there for the first month of school), and sometimes the administrator (although this was usually after a student was in trouble in class and he or she was forced to see her).

Each of these women described how they dealt with students when they would come in troubled. In most cases, these reactions were described as mothering. They would allow students the opportunity to cry or scream or rant. They would show empathy and sympathy. Sometimes they would just be there.

April's role as guidance counselor was very nurturing and mothering for students. There were so many examples of this, but one that I remember most was one of the eighth grade girls came in crying saying she had to go home because she was sweating and it was showing through her shirt. April gave her the sweater she had to wear to cover up the sweat showing. The girl was

embarrassed and said, "what if I make it smell bad." April said, "please, just take it, I want you to stay in school, I can always wash the sweater."

April knew so many things about the students' personal lives from their intake. She really struggled with knowing all the painful information she knew about her students' histories. In many ways, I became her sounding board. Stories of violence including abuse (sexual, verbal, and physical), drug addiction, incarceration, loneliness, gang involvement, and profound loss were difficult for me to emotionally handle--even hearing about them second-hand from April. She clearly was emotionally drained sometimes from hearing such painful stories from young people. But she was available to listen and keep information in confidence. It was clear that they needed more counseling support because one counselor for nearly 100 of these students was insufficient.

Nancy was always available to students too. She drove students to job interviews, doctor's appointments, and probation meetings. Students did not always see her as a safe person to share their emotions because she was also the disciplinarian in the school. She frequently made phone calls home to parents, had police come to pick up delinquent students, and was the one responsible for suspending students in and out of school.

Use of Peer Groups to Model Antisocial Behavior

Adults and young people speak different languages when they talk about violence and other challenging topics such as drugs—any topic where adults want kids to simply avoid or say no without understanding the pressures of their cultures in which they live. Therefore, it becomes critical that adults use peer mentors or groups to model prosocial behavior. However, few programs do this effectively. Certainly at the weapons school this was not done systematically.

Instead of using peer groups to model prosocial behavior, generally antisocial behavior was modeled. Students had to act tough and willing to fight at a moment's notice. As one student put it (when talking about another student), "this school has made Jared a thug--he used to be like a totally normal kid--you know, played baseball and hung out, now he's a thug." Within two months, Jared was in jail for threatening a teacher with a pipe. He got involved with the gang that surrounded the school (known for being one of the toughest in the neighborhood), and kept getting sent home from school for fighting and harassing teachers and students. This behavior was typical and teachers often turned a blind-eye because they did not know what to do. Students would also shout out that they were high when they would walk into a classroom. When this behavior is not handled, it feels like the norm to students, most students felt that "everyone smoked weed during school" because this was the behavior that was modeled and left unchallenged.

Violence and drug-abusing behaviors, the difficult topics for which we have no discourse that bridges the generation gaps, sometimes went unchecked because students knew that adults would not, or perhaps could not, say anything. Sometimes adults would simply "punish" students. However, these forms of punishment were not seen as punitive—sending students home early, sending them home for several days—these were rewards and gave young people more time to "hang on the block" and use drugs and behave violently.

Peers served as models to demonstrate that school was a safe place to fight. Many people mentioned this, and some teachers mentioned getting caught in the middle of a fight and getting hit. The acting principal during a large part of the study said in our interview:

> It is so dangerous out on the streets right now, there's such nasty shit going on in the streets, that the kids are using the schools as their arena for fighting. For settling beefs. Because they know if they settle it out on the streets, the guns are

> there. They know because we have that zero tolerance policy about guns and weapons. So are the weapons still out there? Yeah. But the kids know the seriousness of that so schools are safe... They're afraid of the guns. The guns are out here, everywhere. I mean this corner over here has it's fair of shootings. And the guns are out there. They know the guns aren't in the schools. They know that. And we have never, never confiscated a loaded revolver in a school. We've gotten bullets. We've gotten starter pistols but we've never caught one that was loaded cocked and ready to go. So the kids know that. So they are choosing schools as the arena right now for fighting. Schools always been a safe place to fight. You've got a nurse. You can throw a couple of punches. Somebody's going to break it up. It's not going to get down and dirty to the death stage.

Fights were a fairly regular occurrence at the weapons school as were suspensions. It seemed as though every time I was there, students would be sent home for fighting. There was rarely mediation (although the guidance counselor attempted to mediate with some students who seemed willing), or any attempt to discuss what happened. Fights resulted in being sent home. For students who did not want to be in school, this was not viewed as punishment. It simply meant more time to hang out.

Ever-changing standards and rules and the challenges of monitoring

The standards and rules always seemed to be changing. I know that I was unclear which behaviors would elicit which punishment, so I could not imagine that the students found it much more clear. In addition, each student, depending on how much of a chronic "troublemaker" they were, received a different punishment. For example, one of the students I worked closely with received 3 days out of school suspension for putting a "kick me" sign on the substitute teacher. The week before he received the same punishment for a brawl in the cafeteria. Some teachers were known to be quick to react and dole out punishments, and others rarely did. The

perceptions that the teachers had were that there were few options for punishment for unwanted behavior. Students could be placed in in-school suspension, which was a tiny room without ventilation or windows where they would sit monitored by the hall monitors for a set period of time. Students could not get after school detention because of lack of busing. Students could be sent home for the remainder of a school day with parents notified. Students did receive up to five days out of school suspension. Some students, in severe instances were placed on homebound instruction and not allowed to return. This usually required a formal hearing. Decisions about punishment were made by one of the two administrators. One of the administrators was out for several months with an injury, so with one administrator, the punishments tended to be somewhat clear. She was known to be harsh and would call the police if a student assaulted another student. She would also press charges even if the victim did not want to. She had no problem with sending a student to jail or one of the juvenile detention facilities.

Those on the front-line, the teachers, had varied ways of handling disruptive behavior. The less experienced teachers were quick to react when students would test them. Tone talked about one of his teachers who "has it in for me—I swear she has the referral [to the office] filled out before I even walk in the room." Jerry, another new teacher, was known for being quick to send students to the office. The veteran teachers saw this practice as problematic. Paul for example, described the problem with this:

> It's very difficult. It's easier with the high school kids. It gets a lot more difficult with the 7th and 8th graders. They come and walking around the room, trying to quiet them down. There was days where they would still talk throughout the entire period but it's all to get them to sit down this and that. It wears me out, but hey I got them to sit down, and even though they talked it's a big step for that kid. And for this student, not to write on the desk and I know as a teacher someone would say well throw them out, send them out. Well if you send everybody to the office, how you going to teach someone. If you keep sending them different places, when are they going to

> stop and sit there and say hey, who's going to teach me? What kind of role models are we going to be if we keep sending kids somewhere else, somewhere else.

All of the teachers talked about their frustrations about discipline and students. Ken summed it up well when he said:

> One of the troubles in this school is that there is no intermediate level of discipline. We either yell at them or refer them. There's nothing in the middle. There's no detention. There's nothing else. In my class it's even worse cause it's set up as a lab so you can't really move their seats around. And the only place left in the room is the table, and they have to sit around it in the middle of the room. So there's nothing. So I thought up this alternate sort of a referral thing... what I really want them to do is the work. And they screw around and screw around and act out and do all this stuff that annoys you and eventually you refer them but what your really getting at is that they're not doing any work which is why they're doing the other behavior in the first place. So I had this one kid... I was sick of him... I referred to him and he's pleading with me not to be referred. And I said, all right, you do this work... you can take the book home... you do this work... I'll rip this up. And he didn't do it yesterday, although, he might have done some but I don't know. So I sent the referral in and by this morning he had actually done the stuff. So score one for me. But, and he felt pretty good about that so there's a success of a ninth grader. Turns around later in the period he's doing all this screwy stuff you know like he wants... he goes to the bathroom for fifteen minutes. You know he's screwing around. He knows that I know. And he's back at his old game. So let's see if he can dig himself out of the hole. He sort of has some judgement. I mean he did go and do this work. He didn't just blow it off but on the other hand he can't really make good decisions yet. Nor does he want to.

It seemed that some of the teachers had the perspective that students were capable of learning and making good choices. Some of the newer and more frustrated teachers tended to think that students were "blowing off work" maliciously or out of a profound disrespect for the teacher. The truth was that schooling was not viewed as the most important thing in these students' lives. For some school was not in the top ten. Relationships with friends and romantic (or potential romantic partners) and sometimes family members, the same things that many adults claim to be the most important parts of their lives, are the focus of many of these young people.

However, juggling school work with these relationships in a culture where one needs to consciously consider strategies for staying alive in what sometimes feels like a war zone, can be challenging, and seem unimportant.

Goals shared by some of the stakeholders: Whose voices were missing

The central administration was viewed as calling all the shots at the school. Teachers, despite site-based planning, did not feel that they had any power in goal-setting. Students felt absolutely powerless. And despite efforts to involve parents by involving them as students were brought in, the parent voice was absent. The staff tried to have parent nights, and only a handful of parents would come. They tried having parent day (during the day) and the attendance was just as bleak (7 mothers came to the parent day I observed). One of the teachers thought that some parents (although not students at the weapons school) were too involved and that the district was "too parent driven." He concluded that some of the more "vocal parents" were able to get their children reduced sentences at the weapons school, and there were more vocal parents who were involved with keeping their children from attending the school in the first place.

The overwhelming perception was that the main goal was to warehouse students who were considered troublemakers. This main goal was set by the central administration as a key part to the zero tolerance policy. Homebound instruction was incredibly expensive as more and more students were being found with weapons (or at least reported and no longer tolerated), so the district response was to create a place to put all of these students and educate them together. The funds initially came through a large agency in the same city, but when the funds dried up, the district was invested enough that it took money from its homebound instruction budget to pay for teachers and other staff to run the school. The goals of the administration and others holding the purse-strings was to do more with less. These teachers were already doing as much as they could.

The teachers spent their entire time at the school teaching different courses—sometimes juggling three at once.

Some caring, some competent, and some dedicated staff: The keys to a good teacher at the weapons school

Thomas was known as one of the best teachers in the school, but not only the students but also by the administration. He was a small white man, probably in his early thirties. I had heard from others that he "couldn't make it in the regular schools"--he was known as a "bad teacher" by some folks I had spoken with who had worked with him. He was a "part-timer" but he obviously put many more hours than a part-timer. He taught English to students who did not want to learn traditional English, so he tried to teach them in ways that were relevant to them. He used their language, and he explained how traditional English might look to say the same thing. He did not dismiss the students' ways of communicating--instead he was "fascinated." He was the only teacher who would sit with students in the cafeteria at lunch to learn their language better, so it would inform his teaching. He met with students outside of school to take them to rugby games or other sporting events. When I watched Thomas, I struggled a bit with his delivery. He would scream at students. During our interview, some students thought he and I were locked in the classroom because we were "together" or had some romantic interest in each other--in their minds, why else would a man and a woman of similar ages be alone in a room together. So these students started to whistle and make noises outside the door. Thomas got up and flung open the door, "get in here!" He screamed. I think you have just disrespected us and I think that you owe Ms. Williams an apology." The young boys hung their heads. I had never seen this group feel badly about anything. I watched them bully and beat up others and get yelled at by the principal,

but not show the same head-hanging that they showed Thomas. They did each mumble an apology.

What democratic process?

Students found with a weapon were sent home until a hearing could be arranged. I heard many stories of students trying to get out of having to go to the weapons school at these hearings. Parents would come in and argue on their child's behalf. There were many cases, but one that was most memorable was one young woman whose mother argued at the hearing that she had borrowed her mother's jacket to go out the night before. She brought a knife because she was being stalked by her former boyfriend. Even though she had an order of protection against him, she still always carried a knife for protection. The daughter claimed she did not know the knife was in her pocket until it fell out of her coat in school. She was found guilty of possession of a weapon in school and sent to the weapons school. In another case, a large number of students were sent from one high school when administrators searched every locker for weapons after a big knife fight. Several students were caught and sent to the weapons school.

Because the perception was that students had no rights because they had broken the rules and were being punished, there was no discussion of students' rights and responsibilities. In fact, for most of these students their rights as citizens had been violated. They did not have due process; they did not have legal representation, for most, their weapons were found during questionably legal search and seizure. Certainly, doing time at the weapons school was seen as a punishment, and as such students and their families were seen as having lost their democratic rights.

The need for individualized, culturally relevant instruction, not outside programming

All of the teachers were White except for the Science teacher who was Indian and one of the administrators who was Black. Teachers struggled to make their material interesting and relevant for students, but were unsure how to accomplish this. Thomas was the only one who described specifically trying to select readings for his English class that were culturally relevant. He described this practice:

> So we can talk about stories and relate it to something going on. Maybe not externally in the immediate world but something they've been exposed to a lot. And usually, that's a good way to get these kids to open up about what's going on. The kids feel pretty comfortable doing this. I tried to convey some of my experiences in the class and relay them to the stories they read. And they take a key from me and they feel comfortable enough to talk. Rudy has been here two weeks and he's already one of the voices. But that's one of the good things about this school. These kids need someone to listen to them, but not just listen, but this is a solution. This is something you can try next time you get into a fight…and it's not set up in the cafeteria [Thomas is referring here to the Respect program that Angie conducted with the students in the cafeteria. He made it very clear that he resents outsiders coming in to do programming with these students when they do not understand their day-to-day life in the school]. All right, we're going to the cafeteria, we're gonna get counseled. And some guy comes into the cafeteria and he does his best, but it's all out of context. It's separate from what's going on in the world and I don't like it.

Thomas also talked about changing the curriculum to involve readings about and by African American people because the overwhelming number of students in his classes were African American. Also, as an English/Language teacher, he discussed the importance of using the students' words to communicate:

> It's, I'll tell you Kim, you know, when they see somebody like me all of a sudden use "jiggy" or "phat"…My attitude with it was, it's funny when you see somebody like me saying it, so I to it for laughs. But now it's just so accepted that I can say it all the time. So I broke down the barrier that was one reason…. If you look on the walls there are some of the more common street words, *forte* (we're using forte now) is still up there. Uh, *flounce* is to uh, to we use bounce. And flounce is sort of like when you're walking, you're kind of bouncing down the hall or something

> like that. The other day, I said, 'you guys could bounce... Oh yeah you mean flounce, yeah guys, flounce, peace out, yeah, later.' But you have to use their language, it like breaks down barriers.

Others tried to make courses relevant without necessarily dealing with making courses culturally relevant. For example, Ken, the Introduction to Occupations and Computer teacher did mention trying to make his teaching relevant for these specific students as they were going to try to find jobs (the few that there were for unskilled young people) in the community.

Most teachers struggled with trying to make their courses culturally relevant. Many did not have a language to describe race and culture. I tried to ask specific questions about race, class, and gender and most teachers changed the subject. One such example was Jerry's when I asked him what role race and class played in the classroom and the behavior of his students. He said:

> It's a tough issue. Some teachers think it does play in. I don't know. I don't really know. If this was say, 80% white population, I don't know if we would have a VCR/TV in each room or down the hall I can pick it up and show something. I don't know if there'd be supplies... if there was say 90% white if there'd be a full time teacher for just the middle school students and a full time teacher for the high school students. It seems like it makes more sense cause these students all need more help but I don't know. Like you say it can be interpreted in any way. If you want to believe that then I'm sure that's how you feel. But if you don't want to believe that that's how you feel too. It's all just somebody's opinion I don't know. Unless you can prove it... somebody has a document saying, you know let's see, o.k.

Perhaps Jerry's difficulty here, and other's as well, was the lack of discourses available to talk about race and class. There is a certain degree of paranoia of being labeled "racist" for saying the wrong thing, so in many cases it was easier to dodge the question.

Low standards and expectations for performance

Teachers commented on students' lack of motivation and low academic ability. However, little was done to assess student ability as they entered to create individualized instruction. So, most teachers attempted to give the same watered down curriculum to all students, regardless of their ability. Some of the more experienced teachers had to change their expectations, some started lower and tried to raise them, and for some it was the reverse. Raji explained after her four years of teaching in this setting:

> I am more organized and I expect things from them. Expectations have gone higher and they are, I don't know how to say this, expectations are higher they are performing much better.
> K: What has caused your expectations to go higher?
> A: Because these kids, in the beginning the impression I had was they are troubled kids but they really are not. It's just that some of these kids were in the wrong place at the wrong time. They are good students so I have to raise my expectations.

The business teacher explained this most specifically, although most teachers mentioned the lowering of standards in some way. The common perception was that these students were not ever going to be scholars. They were never going to enjoy schooling, so teachers just had to try to do their best to teach them something—even if this was less than what others were learning at "regular schools":

> Social Studies can be very boring for kids cause it's a huge amount of facts that they have to learn and that's really what the subject matter is. It's just a huge amount of knowledge and to give that up in the interest of compliance or lowering of standards seemed to be regrettable but I was also sympathetic to their problems. If a kid comes in the seventh grade, we're not going to instantly turn them into a scholar.

More often teachers blamed the structure of the school day and that they only had a half an hour to teach each day when they were expected to teach the same material as their counterparts in other schools in the district who had 80 minutes. Thomas summarized this well:

> The district has this traditional attitude about this program, you know, we're an alternative school in one sense, we're moved away from their students. That's the only alternative thing about this school. We have to do everything else-- except in less time. I guess you can say that's alternative, but that's punitive. People get caught with knives all right, we're gonna take away two hours of school. Not that, yeah, you guys don't need the extra school...We're gonna knock off two hours of school and try to come up with some sort of community service so you get a diploma. We should to community service right through this school. I should do community service. Each teacher should take a group of students for one month and work on a project and then after one month, you get ten new kids. And for me, that should be everything from a neighborhood newspaper, surveys, cleaning up garbage in school, doing history on the school. But what do we do?
>
> K: Could you propose that?
>
> T: Well I kind of brought it up a while ago and I believe April re-mentioned it at the last meeting she wanted to do a proposal and central offices just denied our chances. That's the frustrating thing about this is that we could actually make this an alternative school that could better these students as citizens and also enhance their education and their future prospects but what we're doing here, is, we're just sending through the motions. You can come here for a half an hour and we'll try to do our best. These teachers here, try to do their best. But we're not allowed to do what we could to. I'm not talking about influx of large amount of capital. I'm talking about utilizing the staff we have here. We have too many part-time people here.

The part-time staff was also raised as an issue why teachers were unable to give students extra help. Teachers had to supplement their part-time income with other jobs, so they were unavailable to students if they would stay after school. This also made it difficult to build community among the teachers. There was no teacher's room to talk. There were no opportunities for collaboration. Teachers were expected to fend for themselves, and figure out how to teach these students on their own. Teachers also did not have time to get involved in the community service aspect of their students' school days because when they were not teaching,

they were at another job. The teachers had ideas that they wanted to implement, but they felt that the structure of the school day made it impossible. They often felt that any attempt they made to raise this at the administrative level went unheard or simply denied.

Lack of Parental and Community Involvement

Although some parents were involved with their children's educational pursuits at the weapons school, these vocal parents were few and far between. These parents also tended to figure out how to prevent their child from attending the weapons school in the first place (i.e., if they had resources to send their son or daughter to a private school) or helped make sure their child received a shorter sentence at the school. The business teacher, Ken said this of some of the parents: "they do seem to be determinant in who gets out when. They intercede on their child's behalf and you see some kids leaving sooner than others and I think that some... and in large part often their parents interceding rather than their performance."

Few parents felt that they could be involved in the educational system that punished their child for protecting him or herself. Often these parents dropped out of school themselves. As the acting principal described of the parents:

> I shouldn't make that a blanket statement, but a lot of parents aren't involved. You also get to a point where as you get into middle school I just find a lot more parents arguing with me. A lot of kids I deal with here are kids who come from parents who didn't have positive school experiences themselves. Many of them didn't complete school for whatever reason. Many of them were young mothers or young fathers. So they have a really bitter taste in their mouth about school settings and stuff and a sense of what's just and not just. And so sometimes when you try to discipline children in school you don't get cooperation from the parents. And the parent will say to you, I told him to do that. Now here I am trying to say to the child, there are other ways to solve a problem than punching someone in the face. And the parent is telling him, I told you if someone gets in your face that you hit him. So you got that dual message here. And as much as I can say, I can't control what goes on in their immediate home and on the street, but I can say in the confines of this building it will not happen because it's not acceptable. In

> society as a whole, it's not acceptable. But in certain communities, handling problems that way is acceptable.

Clearly, there is a conflict between some school staff and some parents in the community about what is "acceptable" and "appropriate" behavior for a child. These two parties rarely talk, and when there is conflict, the school people hold the power in determining where (and sometimes if) a child can go to school.

Lack of Program Evaluation

There was no attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of the weapons program on students who attended. I had to hunt through the records to find out what happened to students. There were no statistics provided, no teacher observations, no evaluation of programs from outside agencies. The perception among staff and students was that they were an island set up to fend for themselves. If they survived, this was proof enough that the school was doing okay. Nobody talked at all about being evaluated—either their teaching or their student outcomes. Teachers and administrators did not know what happened to students after they left the school (except in a few cases where there was a personal connection and some of the staff found out what happened to some of the students).

There was a great deal of talk at the first staff meeting about feeling as though the district did not have any clear plan of what they were trying to accomplish at the weapons school. The teachers had no idea if the focus was on academics or community service or simply warehousing students. As Jerry said in the staff meeting: "We don't know what the priorities are--academics suffer--kids are behind--Is academics a priority or not, otherwise these kids are just falling further behind and we're setting them up to fail when they go back to their regular schools."

Because there was no clearly articulated goals or mission that the teachers were aware of, there was no attempt made to evaluate how successful students were. It was difficult for me to find any information about the students who returned to their regular schools and those who did not. Many students remained on the roster. As April said, "students know the rules. They know that if you miss twenty days in a row, you're dropped. So they miss like nineteen and then come for a day." (It benefited students on probation to tell the judge that they were enrolled in school, even if they did not attend regularly).

Evaluation is difficult, and defining "success" even more difficult, so it is not unusual that this program did not have any kind of comprehensive evaluation prior to my arrival. As we made plans for a formative evaluation, I quickly realized that virtually no evaluation had been done.

Lack of financial support: Running on a Shoestring

Most of the teachers were outspoken about how shameful it was that the "district" would create a school for these children and not provide enough resources to run it effectively. Part-time teachers were forced to teach seven different classes—sometimes two during the same period. Teachers were forced to find creative ways to obtain books, paper, writing utensils. Some paid out of their own pockets to buy supplies for students. One woman wrote a grant for some books in the library. They did without a television and VCR for most of the academic year. They had a handful of computers, but could not afford to hook the computers up to a printer or to the network. Teachers made up packets for students that were hand-written. Teachers would make photocopies of books. Thomas described the frustration about feeling as though they were not supported by the district in our interview, as did all the other teachers and administrators:

> They [the district] know it exists, they know it's on paper, they know we have a building, we have students. But they don't know really what goes on here because if they did, I'm assuming they don't. If they do know what's going on here, they should be ashamed of themselves. They should be totally ashamed of themselves. If they don't know what's going on here, they should be ashamed of themselves. So either way the district is in a bad situation and this is just an environment that could blow up in the district's face.

There was a great deal of anger and resentment about the lack of resources the school personnel were expected to work with. Some of the teachers did the best they could and did not make much noise, and others were publicly angry about it. Sherry just silently did what she could to obtain teaching materials for her Spanish classes. She explained this in our interview:

> Up there--that's my personal recorder. I've been here two months, I still do not have a teacher's edition, manual, or tapes, anything for myself, ok. When Jamie [a student] came she brought her workbook with her... her Spanish III and IV book and with her manual. I called that teacher, that teacher is willing to make copies for her because that teacher really likes her cause she's an honor student. She photocopied on her teacher's edition, units three and four for me to check.

These teachers were forced to figure out how to get the materials they needed. This was not always easy, but they made do with what they could. The students also picked up on this lack and as Jerrod said, "the district don't care about us—they just stick us in this school with walls and desks...they don't give a shit about us."

Cooperation among agencies involved with students

April, the guidance counselor, and Nancy, the acting administrator during much of the year, interacted frequently with outside agencies on a student's behalf. Most often they dealt with probation officers, juvenile detention facilities personnel, and mental health service workers. April and I would frequently be interrupted by telephone calls from a student's probation officer—she had close relationships with several people in the probation office.

The teachers, on the other hand, were fairly removed from these agencies. Sometimes students would talk about these players in their lives, but often teachers were unaware of the service agencies with whom a student was dealing. In some rare instances, teachers were in contact with family members when students misbehaved, but these were usually extreme cases. Usually Nancy or April would call home.

Lack of vocational training and attempts at job placement: Introduction to Occupations

Introduction to Occupations was a mandatory course for students in high school. Students did not take this course very seriously, or even attend very regularly. The teacher struggled to make this course interesting and meaningful, but he said that students did not see it as helpful. He had some ideas of what might be meaningful, but he felt bound by the curriculum he was told to teach that was more theoretical and less practical. He told me what such a course might look like:

> It could be half of the Intro to Occupations course. Because if somebody were actually working somewhere, even if it were Burger King, they could get... you could have a series of work sheets that would cover at least half of the curriculum. From how to run a point sales terminal to how to get along with coworkers, responsibility to supervisors, what's in your paycheck, how to do percentages, how to make change. It's all there. Community service would actually be better if it weren't quite so much volunteer. If it weren't so much service based as... it could be more practical. And they'd get just as much out of it... Yeah, they might as well get skills cause I don't think they're nearly getting what I would call ethical values out of the course as it's taught now.

I heard many students talk about wanting to be professional athletes, rap singers, dancers, young entrepreneurs. There was very little awareness of other careers that they could have, so they selected these careers that they thought would lead to quick riches without any more schooling. The Social Studies teacher described:

> Well in the beginning we have to give them a survey anyway. I asked them what their goals were. A lot of them really don't have any. And if they did, they were unrealistic... Make 100,000 a year. At the same time, they're talking about getting out of school next year, dropping out and make 100,000.

Feeling unsafe and insecure: Lack of protection

Until March of the fourth year of operation, the weapons school did not have any police officers or security guards--despite the fact that all other schools in the district had police officers. The school was located on one of the most notoriously violent corners of the city. Gangs and drug dealers could be seen every day on the corner selling their wares. The police would come around, especially if there was a call from the administration.

Many students were in rival gang territory, so they had difficulty waiting on the corner to catch the city bus to come to and from school and to and from their community service placements. Some students were afraid, although they could never express this because doing so was viewed as a sign of weakness. In this environment, only the strong survived. If you were not tough, you had to at least put on a convincing act that you could "thug it out" with the best of them.

Relationships and Violence

Working within the environment of the weapons school forced me to examine the ways I construct violence, the way the staff, and the way the students construct violence. There were many examples of what I viewed as violent acts playing a significant part of interpersonal relationships. In romantic relationships, I observed that flirting frequently involved threats of violence, hitting, slapping, and teasing -- more often from the young women than the young men. In addition, the young men and women described that the best way to demonstrate one's loyalty to a girl/boyfriend was to physically fight for them. In a time of life when romantic relationships

were tenuous at best, young men were not supposed to let on that their romantic relationships were important to them (at least not to their other male friends). However, they were expected to fight if the honor of their girlfriend was at stake (e.g., if another person what talking about her in a bad way). Paul demonstrated this when he described "beating the shit" out of his friend who had told Paul's girlfriend's parents that she was pregnant after Paul had confided in him.

In contrast, in this culture, young women were expected to fight other young women to demonstrate their love to their man. For example, as a young woman, if someone was talking to your man, then you had to fight to show the depth of your feelings. Donise described this when she told me about a fight between two girls in the school. She said that girls "be actin' all stupid because of a guy." She told me that girls would fight if another girl looked at her man a certain way. I had heard about this kind of fighting between young women a lot in the weapons school.

Violence when defending close friends (including relationships with fellow gang members) was similar. Fighting was a way to demonstrate one's loyalty and caring without appearing weak. In friendships, as in romantic relationships, the expectation is that the person for whom you are fighting would do the same for you. For example, Jared got suspended from school for getting to a fight. Tone said Jared was just a "flunkie" who was fighting for one of his "boys" (in this case a fellow gang member) because this is how you show that you are one of them. Jared admitted to me that he was fighting to help out one of his friends who was fighting over a young woman. It is important to note that most fights were at least on some level because of a romantic interest or partner.

Conclusions

Life at the weapons school was challenging for students and staff. Staff tried the best they could with the resources they had. They were frustrated by lack of time, supplies, support—

sometimes they were most frustrated because of the students' behavior. Teachers struggled to teach within this culture where violence was an important part of daily survival. Students tried the best they could to stay safe and have romantic relationships and friendships.

It is imperative that those creating such alternative schools consider the importance of having staff who are dedicated, full-time, experienced in dealing with challenging students, and aware of the goals of the school. What kinds of supplies will they need? How many courses will they teach? Will it be individualized instruction or group instruction? How can staff development be most useful for teachers? It is also important to consider the issues the students face on a daily basis. Is the school located in a hotbed of gang activity? How will students be transported? Will they cross gang lines? Clearly there are many variables to be considered for alternative schools. It is important to understand the culture of the school, the perceptions of staff and students, and think about ways to address the common fears and concerns that emerge.

This project demonstrates the need and importance of ethnographic research in understanding violence in our schools. We need to understand how young people make sense of their relationships and the role of violence within these relationships. We need to understand how schools designed to work with the youth most at-risk for violent behavior work with these students, and how staff within these programs and schools understand their roles in helping young people learn alternatives to violent behavior. The project marks the beginning of ethnographic research of this type and calls for more qualitative research to better understand the roots of school violence and the use of alternative educational sites as a school violence prevention strategy.

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